

## The children's horror film

Lester, Catherine

DOI:

[10.7560/vlt7803](https://doi.org/10.7560/vlt7803)

License:

None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Lester, C 2016, 'The children's horror film: characterizing an "Impossible" subgenre', *Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 78, pp. 22-37. <https://doi.org/10.7560/vlt7803>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### **Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is a pre-copyedited version of an article accepted for publication in *Velvet Light Trap* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version is available through the University of Texas Press

### **General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### **Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## The Children's Horror Film: characterizing an “impossible” sub-genre

Catherine Lester

### Abstract

The relationship between children and horror is fraught with tension, with children typically assumed to be vulnerable, impressionable, and in need of protection from horrific media lest they become “corrupted” by it. Despite this, a number of horror films intended specifically for the child demographic have been made since the 1980s. This paper situates the children’s horror sub-genre in a generic and industrial context and addresses the key issues that its existence raises: the development of children’s horror as a sub-genre in Hollywood; how children’s horror films, which due to their target audience must be inherently “less scary” than adult horror films, mediate their content and negotiate issues of censorship in order to be recognizably of the horror genre while remaining “child-friendly;” and what pleasures the sub-genre might serve its audience. The discussion concludes with analysis of the theme of “acceptance” in relation to the films *ParaNorman* (2012), *Frankenweenie* (2012) and *Hotel Transylvania* (2012): acceptance of monsters, of other people, and of the consumption of the horror genre as a valid children’s pastime.

### Paper

Children are traditionally considered innocent, vulnerable and impressionable beings. Horror, which is typically considered a genre for adults, is one particular area of the media from which children are often thought of as needing protection; however, research shows that children’s enjoyment of horror films goes back to at least as early as the advent of sound cinema,<sup>1</sup> and the number of horror films made specifically for the child demographic has been steadily increasing since the 1980s. In spite of this, scholarship dedicated to this rich and intriguing area is scarce. This paper therefore situates

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah J. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 57-58.

horror for children in a generic and industrial context, asking how it is possible for such a sub-genre to exist if the very things that make horror “horrifying” must be excluded, or significantly lessened, in order for these films to remain “child-friendly”?

This paper begins by establishing the tensions at work over the course of the twentieth century regarding the relationship between children and horrific media, and charts the development of the children’s horror sub-genre in Hollywood. From there, the discussion turns to key critical work on “horror for adults” and genre theory, such as that by Noël Carroll, Robin Wood, Andrew Tudor and Steve Neale, and considers how the definitions of the horror genre put forth in such works can be applied to, or are problematized by, the children’s horror sub-genre. Particular attention is given to the types of monsters seen in children’s horror, according to Carroll’s definition, the children’s horror film’s mediation of gore and violence and the potential pleasures of these elements, and the sub-genre’s typical narrative features and structures. Reference is made throughout to notable children’s horror films of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries and empirical research on the relationship between children and frightening media is referred to where this is relevant and adds weight to the arguments put forth. It is argued that although the children’s horror sub-genre largely adopts narrative and formal strategies of horror films for adults, it can successfully mediate content that might be considered “unsuitable” for children. Closing out the paper, closer attention is paid to a relatively recent cluster of children’s horror films and their commonalities: *ParaNorman* (2012), *Frankenweenie* (2012) and *Hotel Transylvania* (2012). The theme of “acceptance” is identified in each of these, and in subsequent examples of the sub-genre, whether the acceptance of monsters, of other people, or of the consumption of the horror genre as a valid pastime for children.

### Children and horror: an uneasy combination?

Since as early as the 1930s, horror films have incited public concern due to their popularity with children.<sup>2</sup> “The innate threat of horror films,” writes Sarah Smith on this period, “was their combination of sex, violence and the supernatural, which broke taboos, challenged Christian values and subverted the social order.”<sup>3</sup> This sentiment is arguably still applicable to contemporary horror cinema, especially given the increased quotas of sex, gore and violence in the genre that have been permissible since the abolition of the Hollywood Production Code Administration and its replacement with the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) ratings system in 1968. This measure intended to prevent children from seeing film content that was thought to distress or otherwise “harm” them.

Kevin Heffernan pinpoints this industrial shift as being a major factor in the development of “adult horror.”<sup>4</sup> Heffernan highlights *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) as being exemplar of this new form of adult-oriented horror film, characterized by contemporary settings, downbeat endings and explicit violence.<sup>5</sup> Heffernan also identifies the common motif of the “demon child” in these emergent adult horror films, including the aforementioned *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist* (1973). Drawing from the work of William Paul, Heffernan ties this motif to contemporaneous social anxiety concerning a loss of control of children and an increasing difficulty in defining the so-called “culture of childhood,”<sup>6</sup> an anxiety that is similarly seen in the work of psychiatrist Frederic Wertham. In *Seduction of the Innocent*, his 1954 criticism of comic books, Wertham feared that the “corrupting influence” of horror

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 7, 181-201.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 185; William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 282.

comics would transform child readers into juvenile delinquents.<sup>7</sup> Paul suggests that efforts such as Wertham's, and the later restrictions of the MPAA ratings system, were done not in the interest of protecting children, but in protecting *adults* from what children might become when exposed to "horrific" content.<sup>8</sup> Despite attempts to restrict children's access to such material, these anxieties continue to proliferate in Hollywood as well as in other cultural contexts given the possibility that children might encounter horror through other, less strictly mediated channels, i.e. television, VHS, DVD and the internet. One significant case of this heightened anxiety is the "video nasty" controversy, occurring in Britain in the early-1980s, which sparked heated media debate concerning what the ease of availability of horror video tapes, which due to a loophole in film classification laws were not regulated by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), would do to children who might be exposed to them in the home.<sup>9</sup> This debate resurfaced in 1993 in the wake of the murder of toddler James Bulger by two ten-year-old boys, who were suspected (but never proved) to have been inspired by the film *Child's Play 3* (1991).<sup>10</sup>

Although these examples do not necessarily provide conclusive proof of the negative effect of horror on children, they do display the concern of many adults over the effect that horror might have on children, and their attempts to police children's consumption of such texts. These also ignore the

---

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (London: Museum Press Limited, 1954), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Paul, *Laughing Screaming*, 277.

<sup>9</sup> For information and criticism of the video nasty debate, see Martin Barker, *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Martin Barker and Julian Petley, ed. *III Effects: the media/violence debate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2001); and the documentary film *Video Nasties: Moral Panic, Censorship & Videotape* (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Martin Barker, "The Newson Report: a case study in 'common sense,'" in *III Effects: the media/violence debate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 2001), 27-46; Patricia Holland, "Living for libido; or, 'Child's Play IV': the imagery of childhood and the call for censorship," in *III Effects: the media/violence debate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 2001), 78-86.

ironic result that censorship of an item often makes it more desirable; as argued by David Pace Wigransky, a teenaged critic of Wertham, "If a child is told not to read a comic book, he will break his neck to do it."<sup>11</sup> This also alludes to the fact that many (but not all) children enjoy horror and find certain pleasures in it. Such children feature in David Buckingham's empirical study on children's emotional responses to viewing horror films and television programs, which revealed that, as with many adult fans of horror, the experience of fear seemed to be "synonymous with pleasure," and the experience of watching horror a somewhat therapeutic experience that allows child viewers to confront and cope with negative feelings.<sup>12</sup> Given the "taboo" nature of children watching horror, the experience was also seen as a mark of maturity.<sup>13</sup> With regards to whether or not horror is detrimental to children, Buckingham suggests that this depends upon the context of "how they perceive and interpret it; and upon the social contexts in which they watch and subsequently talk about it with others."<sup>14</sup> Buckingham's study and others like it<sup>15</sup> focus almost entirely on children's responses to adult-oriented media. Only passing mention is made by Buckingham to children's horror in the form of Halloween paraphernalia and child-friendly re-workings of classic horror texts.<sup>16</sup> Classifying these as children's "comedy horror," Buckingham hypothesizes that they might allow children to balance

---

<sup>11</sup> David Pace Wigransky, "Letters to the Editor," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Jul 24, 1948, 20.

<sup>12</sup> David Buckingham, *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 111-112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 136. A similar observation is made in Dafna Lemish and Michal Alon-Tirosh's "'I Was Really Scared': A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Reconstructing Children's Fearful Viewing Experiences," in *The Emotions Industry*, ed. Mira Moshe (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2014), 154.

<sup>15</sup> See Lemish and Alon-Tirosh, "'I Was Really Scared.'"

<sup>16</sup> Examples include *Count Duckula* (1988-1993), *Sesame Street's* Count von Count (1969-), *Alvin and the Chipmunks Meet the Wolfman* (2000), *Frankenweenie* (2012) and the two *Hotel Transylvania* films (2012, 2015).

negative and positive feelings and thus “provide a relatively safe arena in which the fundamental anxieties with which the genre deals can begin to be addressed.”<sup>17</sup> These observations will be returned to and built upon below, in tandem with this paper’s principal aim to situate the children’s horror film within its generic context.

### “It’s alive!”: the emergence of a sub-genre

The development of the children’s horror sub-genre in Hollywood can be traced back to the beginnings of the MPAA in 1968, the point that Heffernan identifies as the birth of modern “adult horror.” By simple virtue of opposition, if the MPAA ratings system resulted in the emergence of adult horror films containing mature themes and content that children were, theoretically, restricted from seeing, then it can be argued that this also opened up a space for child-oriented horror films with unrestrictive ratings.<sup>18</sup> Several films emerged in the 1980s, such as Disney’s *The Watcher in the Woods* (1980) and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1983). These were financial and critical disappointments, perhaps due to the uneasy combination of the films’ dark themes and somber tones with the Disney studio, known at that point for being the only Hollywood studio reliably creating “child-friendly” entertainment.<sup>19</sup> *Ghostbusters* and *Gremlins* (both 1984), however, were hugely successful, which

---

<sup>17</sup> Buckingham, *Moving Images*, 135-136.

<sup>18</sup> As of 2016 the unrestrictive MPAA ratings are G (general audiences), PG (parental guidance) and PG-13 (parents are strongly cautioned when considering allowing a child under thirteen years of age to view a film). The restrictive ratings are R (restricted to those over seventeen years of age unless accompanied by an adult) and NC-17 (restricted only to those over seventeen years of age).

<sup>19</sup> Evidence of Disney’s association with child-friendly, “safe” entertainment is displayed by a survey on women’s opinions of the film industry carried out by *McCall’s* magazine in 1967, one year after Walt Disney’s death. The survey’s respondents are reported as worrying what they can take their children to see “now that Walt Disney is dead?” Lenore Hershey, “What Women Think of the Movies,” *McCall’s*, May, 1967, 28. The 1970s and 1980s were a generally difficult time for the studio. Following Disney’s death, the studio underwent

may have been due to their comedy-horror hybridity and association with well-known names that gave them mass appeal to viewers of all ages: *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) alumni Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd in *Ghostbusters*, and *Gremlins* producer Steven Spielberg.

*Gremlins* had a significant role in the emergence of horror catered to children in 1980s Hollywood. Rated PG, the film apparently shocked parents who were not prepared for its violent content and dark, satirical tone.<sup>20</sup> In response, the MPAA introduced the PG-13 rating in 1984 to better warn parents when a film might not be suitable for children and pre-teens. Filipa Antunes argues that the introduction of the PG-13 was a watershed moment for children and horror, given that it opened further space for horror films to be created which were not too intense or violent to be given a restrictive rating, but were frightening enough that extra warning would be needed that the films might distress young children.<sup>21</sup> In the following years a number of horror films were given PG-13 ratings, such as *The Gate* (1987), *The Monster Squad* (1987) and the anthology film *The Willies* (1990). The fact that these films feature protagonists who are the same age as the pre-teen target audience,

---

major changes in management, survived aggressive takeover attempts, and struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing industry due to the emergence of New Hollywood. For example, it attempted to respond to the success of *Star Wars* (1977) with the expensive, effects-heavy and tonally dark science-fiction films *The Black Hole* (1979) and *Tron* (1982), both of which were financial and critical disappointments. Douglas Gomery, "Disney's Business History: A Reinterpretation," in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom* ed. Eric Smoodin (London: Routledge, 1994), 78-79; Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter* (London: I.B. Tauris: 2012), 148, 158-160. Although these films, as well as *Watcher in the Woods* and *Something Wicked*, seemed to anticipate the growing taste for children's films of darker moods and themes that would occur over the next three decades, they may have simply been catering to an audience that did not yet exist.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Zoglin, "Gremlins in the Rating System," *Time*, June 25, 1984, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Filipa Antunes, "Children and Horror after PG-13: The Case of *The Gate*," *Networking Knowledge* 6, no. 4 (2014): 18-28.



and revolve around themes of friendship and family rather than those of sexuality often found in teen horror films of the period like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), differentiates them from the earlier *Ghostbusters* and *Gremlins*.<sup>22</sup> In opposition to the demon child motif seen in much adult horror, these films feature adult authority figures, such as parents and lawmakers, who are evil, ineffectual, or absent altogether. This leaves – and empowers – the child protagonists to take matters into their own hands. In *The Monster Squad*, for example, the army arrive at the end of the film only to find that the titular Monster Squad, a group of children who are horror fans, have already successfully dispatched the monsters. The factors of child protagonists, child-centric themes and an absence of reliable adult figures indicate a direct address to child and pre-teen audiences rarely seen in horror films made during the era of the Production Administration Code or before the implementation of the PG-13 rating, and they continue to characterize most child-oriented horror films throughout the 1990s and beyond which typically carry ratings of PG or PG-13. Further, like other children's sub-genres, children's horror films are often accompanied by tie-in merchandising geared at children, such as toys.<sup>23</sup> These factors are also helpful (but not integral) in differentiating children's horror films from other horror films with unrestrictive ratings of PG-13 or below (e.g. *The Ring* [2002]); there is an important distinction between films that are merely "suitable" to be viewed by children, and those that specifically target children as a core part of the audience.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>23</sup> Although adult horror films can spawn merchandise, it tends to be in the form of figurines, posters and t-shirts, as opposed to toys that are intended to be played with. Further, for children's cinema, the production of toys is usually a part of the marketing campaign leading up to a film's release, while much merchandise for adult horror usually comes after a film has been released and accrued a following.

<sup>24</sup> It is all the more important to highlight this distinction given that many adult or teen-oriented horror films are rated PG-13 as it is the most financially lucrative of the MPAA ratings. The highest-grossing horror film in the US is the PG-13-rated *The Sixth Sense* (1999). "Market Share for Each MPAA Rating 1995-2016," *The Numbers*, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://www.the-numbers.com/market/mpaa-ratings>.

At the time of writing, horror films targeted at child audiences are not as common in US cinema as films of other children's sub-genres (e.g. comedy and fantasy), but they do occur fairly regularly, especially in the Autumn months near Halloween. Offerings over the past decade include *Monster House* (2006), *Coraline* (2009), *Frankenweenie* (2012), *ParaNorman* (2012), the two *Hotel Transylvania* films (2012, 2015) and *Goosebumps* (2015), the film adaptation of the successful book series by R. L. Stine (1992-1997) that also spawned a popular television series (1995-1998). This list is not exhaustive and does not account for the plethora of horror-themed television shows, novels, toys and transmedia texts produced for children of late. A highly successful example of the latter is *Monster High*: a franchise of Barbie/monster hybrid dolls aimed at pre-teen girls. The dolls feature as characters in an ongoing narrative that spans webisodes, direct-to-DVD films and magazines, while other merchandise includes clothing, make-up and stationery. Although the proliferation of horror in non-filmic children's media is also deserving of academic attention, for pressures of space the focus of this paper is the children's horror film in Hollywood cinema.

### Horror for children: defining the "impossible"

An immediate problem with the concept of the "children's horror film" is that the principal intention of the horror film is to scare its audience, but, as established above, the notion of intentionally scaring children or showing them "horrific" material can be seen as controversial. Children's horror might therefore be considered an "impossible" sub-genre: how can it be classified as "horror" if it must significantly lessen, or exclude altogether, several of the very aspects that are generally considered as making horror films "horrific"?<sup>25</sup> Here it is necessary to recall the major critical arguments on horror cinema and to consider how these arguments apply to, or are problematized by, horror films created for children.

---

<sup>25</sup> This question is posed, but unanswered, by Peter Gutierrez in "When fear is fun: Considering genre and audience in horror movies for kids," *Screen Education* 69 (2013): 90.

It is important to note that fear, as with other emotional responses that form the basis of some film genres (e.g. amusement for comedy, sadness for melodrama), is subjective. This is the case for adults as much as for children. A twenty-first century audience might not be scared by an early classic of the horror genre, like *Dracula* (1931) – the film may now be more likely to elicit laughter at its dated production values than a fearful response – and may be divided as to the “scariness” of more recent offerings, from the violent “torture porn” films of the *Saw* series (2004-2010) to the psychologically unsettling *The Babadook* (2014). Yet we are comfortable with broadly classifying these disparate films as being of the horror genre, given their adherence to certain codes and conventions of the genre and the use of recognizable motifs, iconography, themes and narrative patterns.<sup>26</sup> Richard Russell identifies this approach as “objectivist,” in contrast to the “subjectivist” approach that focuses on the genre’s emotional effects.<sup>27</sup> For Russell, neither approach is satisfactory in isolation, with objectivism being limiting in not accounting for variation and hybridity in the genre. This aligns with Steve Neale’s work on genre theory, in which he argues that only focusing on repetitive similarities between films ignores the very thing that gives genres longevity: variation and difference.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, Russell sees the subjective approach as being far too broad and vague, in that how “scary” something is can vary from person to person<sup>29</sup> – including, from child to child. It can usually be recognized when a film is *attempting* to scare its audience with “objective” identifiers, like the use of violence and/or gore, the creation of suspense and “jump scares” through editing, lighting, sound and music, and a variety of other tactics; yet there will always be exceptions to every rule, carving out new

---

<sup>26</sup> Attesting to this is that the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) categorizes *Dracula*, *Saw* (2004) and *The Babadook* as “horror,” with latter two hybridized with “mystery” and “drama,” respectively.

<sup>27</sup> David J. Russell, “Monster Roundup: Reintegrating the Horror Genre,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 234.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Neale, “Questions of Genre,” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 173.

<sup>29</sup> Russell, “Monster Roundup,” 235.

space for genres to develop in what Neale refers to as “processes.”<sup>30</sup> These processes may “be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, repetition, and change.”<sup>31</sup> As is detailed throughout this paper, children’s horror displays generic repetition by employing similar techniques and narrative elements as horror films for adults, but children’s horror also necessitates variation and difference from adult horror in order to make these films “suitable for children.” The children’s horror film might therefore be understood as part of this process of the ongoing development of the horror genre, as well as displaying its own internal development.

Noël Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror*<sup>32</sup> is one of the seminal critical works on the genre, and due to its emphasis on narrative structure and emotional responses can be considered as operating between the objective and subjective camps. Although it has its limitations, Carroll’s work serves as a useful basis for approaching children’s horror in a generic context. Carroll works from the claim that horror is “marked by the presence of monsters”<sup>33</sup> and argues that the horror genre can in part be characterized by the emotional responses that these monsters are intended to evoke in the audience. More than simply evoking fear, Carroll argues that horror’s monsters must also evoke disgust.<sup>34</sup> According to Carroll, horror monsters are disgusting because they are impure: the result of the “fusion” or transgression of categorical distinctions such as living/dead (e.g. vampires, zombies) or human/inhuman (e.g. werewolves).<sup>35</sup> This is highly applicable to children’s horror as many films of the sub-genre feature transgressive or fused monsters, whether zombies and ghosts in *ParaNorman*, the titular house/woman hybrid of *Monster House* or the deceased pets that are resurrected in

---

<sup>30</sup> Neale, “Questions of Genre,” 165.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 43.

*Frankenweenie* (one of which is also a “fusion” of a cat and a bat). What is notable from these examples and from Carroll’s definition is that the monster is limited to the supernatural, thus excluding “realistic” monsters such as serial killers in the slasher film, which is widely considered as a valid horror sub-genre in other scholarly and popular definitions of the genre.<sup>36</sup> Carroll is aware of this limitation of his work and that other definitions may be more permissive,<sup>37</sup> but it is nonetheless useful to open up the definition of the “monster” to include other transgressive characteristics. For example, the serial killers, psychopaths and sexual deviants who horrify in the slasher film transgress *moral* boundaries, and they evoke fear and disgust at their transgressions of morality as well as at the visceral gore that results from their violent actions. It is typically the gore, violence, and immorality displayed in some horror that is thought by the genre’s detractors to be particularly detrimental to children, hence films featuring such material are usually given restrictive age classifications to prevent children from seeing them. Carroll’s definition of horror as featuring supernatural monsters and evoking both fear and disgust in its audience therefore applies to children’s horror where this does not result in extreme violence, gore, or other qualities often deemed “objectionable” in children’s content; it is only the expansion of this definition to include “realistic” monsters and horror (i.e. human beings whose actions are explicitly violent) that is less applicable to the children’s horror sub-genre.

### Negotiating censorship: gore, violence and the pleasure of disgust

The notion that children’s horror films must refrain from depicting “realistic” horror and violence aligns with the views of the MPAA, whose guidelines state that G-rated films should contain only

---

<sup>36</sup> Carol J. Clover, for example, classifies the slasher sub-genre as horror in her *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). She specifically cites Carroll in expressing her desire *not* to adhere to the definitions of others, deciding instead to be guided by “video rental store categorizations, which, despite some variation from store to store, seem to capture better than any definition I know what the public senses to be ‘horror.’” Ibid., 5n.

<sup>37</sup> Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 39.

“minimal violence,” PG-rated films “some violence” that is not intense, and a PG-13 may contain violence that is not “realistic and extreme or persistent.”<sup>38</sup> It is also useful to refer to the guidelines of the British equivalent, the BBFC, which has a very similar set of film ratings and provides more detail on the restrictions of each category than the MPAA.<sup>39</sup> The BBFC’s guidelines state that in a PG-rated film violence is “generally more acceptable in a historical, comedic or fantasy setting, because of the distancing that this provides.”<sup>40</sup> *ParaNorman* (rated PG by both the MPAA and BBFC) serves as a good example of this. The protagonist of the film, Norman Babcock, is a pre-teen boy who can see and speak to the dead. He shares this gift with his uncle, who before his untimely death bestows upon Norman the task of placating the spirit of a vengeful witch who was killed three centuries before, and whose spirit threatens to rise from the grave on the anniversary of her death. When Norman fails to do this, the witch’s spirit awakens and simultaneously resurrects the zombified town council members who sentenced her. In attempting to find a way to stop the witch’s spirit and the zombies from destroying the town of Blithe Hollow and its inhabitants, Norman discovers that the witch was only an innocent little girl, Aggie, who was feared by the puritanical society in which she lived as she, like Norman,

---

<sup>38</sup> Motion Picture Association of America and National Association of Theatre Owners, *Classification and Rating Rules*, 7, January 1, 2010, accessed January 20, 2016. [http://filmratings.com/downloads/rating\\_rules.pdf](http://filmratings.com/downloads/rating_rules.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> The equivalent BBFC ratings are U in place of the MPAA’s G, PG remaining the same, and 12A in the place of PG-13. While a child of any age may see a PG-13-rated film unaccompanied, the 12A indicates that a child under the age of twelve may see a film only if accompanied by an adult. The relative lack of transparency behind the MPAA’s decisions is the subject of the documentary film *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2006) and has been widely criticized in the press. See for example Ian Buckwalter, “Did *The Conjuring* Really Deserve an ‘R’ Rating Just for Being Scary?,” *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2013, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/did-em-the-conjuring-em-really-deserve-an-r-rating-just-for-being-scary/277965/>.

<sup>40</sup> “PG,” *British Board of Film Classification*, accessed Aug 5, 2015, <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/what-classification/pg>.

possessed an ability to speak to the dead. Norman learns this via a vision of her trial, in one of the film's arguably most distressing scenes largely devoid of supernatural elements. However, it provides the "distancing" effect referred to by the BBFC in that it takes place in a historical context, the eighteenth century. At other points during *ParaNorman*, comedy is used in combination with moments of fear and disgust to mitigate the horror, which adheres with the BBFC's stipulation that frightening moments "will be balanced by reassuring elements, such as comic interludes or music."<sup>41</sup> The zombies in *ParaNorman* are clearly disgusting, with their pallid, sagging skin and detachable body parts, but there is an emphasis on their potential for amusement. During a sequence in which the zombies burst from their graves, for example, one emerges feet-first, and another backside-first. Inserting such instances of unexpected levity theoretically helps to prevent frightening moments from becoming too prolonged or intense and, as Buckingham posits, allows children to balance "negative" feelings of fear and disgust with "positive" ones of amusement and relief.<sup>42</sup> This reasoning is supported by other empirical research which reveals that when children view frightening media, the longer a threatening sequence continues without relief the more frightening and distressing it will be.<sup>43</sup>

*ParaNorman*, while a good example of a children's horror film that fits the above criteria, also contains a caveat to the claim that children's horror should refrain from realism. In what might be the film's most objectively "disgusting" moment, Norman, the film's protagonist, becomes trapped underneath the dead corpse of his uncle while trying to wrestle a book out of its rigamortis-frozen hands (Fig. 1). When the dead uncle's tongue flops out of his mouth onto Norman's face, it transcends disgustingness to approach the abject in the sense theorized by Julia Kristeva: when a living person comes into contact with physical matter of death and is confronted with the knowledge that one day

---

<sup>41</sup> "U," *British Board of Film Classification*, accessed Aug 5, 2015, <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/what-classification/u>.

<sup>42</sup> Buckingham, *Moving Images*, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Cynthia Hoffner and Joanne Cantor, 1991. "Factors Affecting Children's Enjoyment of a Frightening Film Sequence," *Communication Monographs* 58, no. 1 (1992): 42.

their own bodies will also decay.<sup>44</sup> It goes without saying that this is very heavy material for a so-called children's film, and is a rare moment of "realistic" horror in a children's horror film in the sense that it is entirely possible (even if unlikely) for a middle-class American child like Norman to come into contact with a corpse. However, some key strategies work to lessen the discomfort that the scene might cause.

Like many other children's horror films and children's films in general, *ParaNorman* is animated – specifically, stop-motion animated – and has a particularly stylized aesthetic that signals a clear departure from realism.<sup>45</sup> *Frankenweenie*, another stop-motion film, takes its stylization a step further by being presented entirely in black-and-white. This is part of director Tim Burton's way of paying homage to the classic monster movies that inspired the film, but the absence of color might also have the effect of "lessening" moments of horror and disgust while also emphasizing the fictional nature of the story.<sup>46</sup> Empirical research shows that very young children can have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, and that this is can be more difficult when the text in question is

---

<sup>44</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Stop-motion is also thematically suited to children's horror films, particularly *ParaNorman*, *Frankenweenie* and *Corpse Bride* (2005) which involve the resurrection, or rather *reanimation*, of the dead. In a similar fashion, the process of stop-motion concerns giving the illusion of movement and "life" to figurines and objects that would otherwise be still and "lifeless."

<sup>46</sup> It is interesting that the live-action short version of *Frankenweenie* that Burton produced in 1984, also black-and-white, was disliked by Disney and resulted in Burton's firing; it was considered too scary for children. Tim Burton and Mark Salisbury, *Burton on Burton* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 38-39. That the same studio produced the animated 2012 version might be a reflection of children's horror having become more accepted and widespread in the intervening twenty-eight years, or of Burton's increased stature in Hollywood. However, many of Disney's animated films prior to 1984 feature frightening and distressing content, such as *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942). It is therefore possible that the 1984 *Frankenweenie* was received negatively by Disney due to it having been live-action rather than animated, thus seeming more "realistic."



perceived as frightening.<sup>47</sup> If a text is animated, however, this can aid children up to the age of eight in judging whether or not the events portrayed are real.<sup>48</sup> As opposed to live-action, animated content is known not to be real because it does not *look* real. Norman grappling with his uncle's corpse in *ParaNorman* may therefore elicit disgust from its audience, but this will likely be lessened by the knowledge that Norman is a fictional character in a fictional setting. (For older children who may know how the stop-motion animation process works, it may be lessened further by the knowledge that the characters are merely figurines being controlled by human filmmakers.) Further, any disgust felt by the audience will arguably not match that felt by Norman in this imaginary scenario, which aligns with Carroll's assertion that the emotions of horror audiences should be parallel to, "but not exactly duplicate," those of the positive on-screen characters.<sup>49</sup>

Following from this argument that the audience's emotions should be similar but not identical to those of the characters is that viewers of *ParaNorman* may have other responses in addition to disgust that Norman clearly does not: amusement and, by extension, possibly pleasure. It is clearly intended to be a moment of "gross-out" comedy as much as of "gross-out" horror; two forms that Paul argues are closely linked by their obsession with the human body's potential for disgust.<sup>50</sup> To suggest that pleasure can be derived from disgust is contra to Carroll's attempt to account for the "paradox" of why audiences deliberately watch something that scares or disgusts them. Disgust is merely the "price to pay" for what Carroll sees as the true pleasure of horror: the satisfaction of the audience's curiosity through experiencing the way a narrative plays out and how it answers the

---

<sup>47</sup> Adrienne Samuels and Marjorie Taylor, "Children's ability to distinguish fantasy events from real-life events," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 12, no. 4 (1994): 417–427.

<sup>48</sup> Hope Kelly, "Reasoning About Realities: Children's Evaluations of Television and Books," in *Viewing Children Through Television*, ed. Hope Kelly and Howard Gardner (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), 66.

<sup>49</sup> Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Paul, *Laughing Screaming*.

question of if and how the monster will be destroyed.<sup>51</sup> However, it is also possible that pleasure can be derived from horror monsters not *in spite of* them being repulsive, but *because* they are repulsive – especially for child audiences. Indeed, Buckingham’s aforementioned study features many children who display an open fascination with horror’s disgusting moments of gore and impressive practical effects.<sup>52</sup> It might even be that the children’s horror film is where disgust is best placed, for despite some concerns that horror is not suitable for children, “adult horror” is often paradoxically accused of immaturity and is associated with adolescent males.<sup>53</sup> Although these claims are often made in order to devalue the genre, in some cases pointing out the “childishness” of the genre is done in praise. Victoria de Rijke, for example, writes that horror is “a childish genre, in the best sense,”<sup>54</sup> and Stephen King discusses the “primitive, childish level” of horror as a form of art: “the good gross-out wallop finds its art in childish acts of anarchy.”<sup>55</sup>

The relationship between childishness and adult horror films is also implied in critical writing that refers to the act of watching horror as a game. Vera Dika’s *Games of Terror*<sup>56</sup> states this in its title, for example, and Paul refers to the fun and playfulness of horror, likening watching horror to going to amusement park “where we make a game out of our own feelings.”<sup>57</sup> This resonates with Freud’s claim that children create games based on the very things that distress them as a way of gaining

---

<sup>51</sup> Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 181-182.

<sup>52</sup> Buckingham, *Moving Images*, 120.

<sup>53</sup> For example James Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7; Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 9.

<sup>54</sup> Victoria De Rijke, “Horror,” in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature Vol. 1*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 2004), 516.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 218-219.

<sup>56</sup> Vera Dika, *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle* (London: Associated University Press, 1990).

<sup>57</sup> Paul, *Laughing Screaming*, 421-422.

“mastery” over them,<sup>58</sup> and Buckingham detects a similar coping strategy at work in his study of children’s responses to horror; he posits that children’s repetitive viewing of certain horror films or sequences can form part of a conscious coping strategy.<sup>59</sup> Further, some children in Buckingham’s study seem to treat watching horror as a game or battle to be “won” by displaying how much they can “take,” and ultimately “conquer fear.”<sup>60</sup> This behavior is echoed in Brigid Cherry’s description of adult horror connoisseurs who derive pleasure from viewing acts of disgust in horror in order to prove how much they can handle.<sup>61</sup> If horror’s pleasures can so often stem from the childishness it draws out in its adult viewers, then not only is children’s horror not an “impossible” sub-genre, but it is an entirely logical one.

Although “gross-out” humor and horror might be key attractions and elements of horror for children, some children’s horror films operate principally on a subtler form of horror where what is most frightening or disgusting is what is *not* shown; a tactic that is useful in obtaining an unrestrictive, and therefore “child-friendly,” film rating. *Coraline*, made by Laika, the same studio that produced *ParaNorman*, is an excellent example of this. The eponymous protagonist discovers a portal to a parallel version of her house which is near identical but for that it is so much more appealing; characterized by warmer colors, amazing toys, a talking cat and all of Coraline’s favorite foods. It is also populated by doppelgangers of her parents, known as Other Mother and Other Father, who are more attentive to her desires than her real parents, by whom Coraline feels ignored. The only drawback to this parallel world is that its inhabitants’ eyes are replaced with buttons: in order to remain in this world Coraline must follow suit, but she soon realizes that this is a ploy by the evil Other

---

<sup>58</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 8-10.

<sup>59</sup> Buckingham, *Moving Images*, 113.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>61</sup> Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London: Routledge, 2009), 159.

Mother to capture Coraline's soul. The film thus makes passing reference to the violent procedure of having buttons sewn onto one's eyes, but this is never shown or described in detail. Rather, the horror and disgust of the procedure (which Coraline manages to avoid) are conveyed almost entirely through Coraline's reaction to the idea of it. Similarly, *Frankenweenie's* most horrific and upsetting aspect is not the grotesque monsters who wreak havoc upon the town within the film, but the death of the protagonist's dog when he is hit by a car. This is another rare moment of realism in children's horror, and thus the moment avoids being graphic by not showing the collision or its result. The focus is the distraught reaction of the protagonist Victor as he witnesses the event; distress that, crucially, is not prolonged due to Victor's imminent resurrection of Sparky the dog in the film's homage to *Frankenstein* (1931).

Children's horror films that evoke most of their horror from what is "not shown," like *Coraline*, also employ some aesthetic and formal strategies that are associated with the slasher in order to establish a mood of uneasiness and suspense. Most notably, *Coraline* makes use of voyeuristic shots which in the slasher indicate the perspective of the killer as he stalks his victims in and around their homes, as seen in *Halloween* (1978). In one sequence early in *Coraline*, the protagonist explores the garden and surrounding area of her home, but the shots used to show this are implied to be from the perspective of a voyeur, hiding behind rocks and inside bushes as it spies on the protagonist. Carol Clover writes that shots of this sort create tension by aligning and implicating the audience with the "assaultive gaze" of the killer.<sup>62</sup> Conversely, they also position the audience in a vulnerable position as the subjective camera "calls attention to what it cannot see."<sup>63</sup> This effect is arguably ideally suited to children's horror films given their need to avoid showing violence and, in the case of *Coraline*, gently imply it instead. The avoidance of violence also distinguishes *Coraline* from adult-oriented slashers like *Halloween* due to the fact that the former's subjective shots do not culminate in violence, and

---

<sup>62</sup> Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 211.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

that any uneasiness created is significantly lessened by Bruno Coulais' gentle, pleasant musical score that accompanies this particular scene – a stark contrast to the dread evoked by *Halloween's* iconic score.

### “Once upon a time...”: narrative elements of children's horror

In addition to his definition of horror through classification of the “monster,” Carroll characterizes the genre by narrative structure. As referenced above, Carroll identifies the horror genre as being “marked by the presence of monsters,” and it is the presence of monsters and what happens to them that many other horror scholars refer to in their definitions of horror and the genre's typical narrative structure(s). Robin Wood, for instance, refers to the monster's importance to initiating the horror narrative in his statement that “normality is invaded by the monster,” where “normality” is taken to be the dominant (i.e. conservative) social ideology and the “monster” to be a figurative representation of society's repressed fears.<sup>64</sup> Andrew Tudor goes further with his basic structure, based on a survey of over 900 horror films, that attempts to be specific to horror but is vague enough to allow for Neale's emphasis on the need for generic variation: “a monstrous threat is introduced into a stable situation; the monster rampages in the face of attempts to combat it; the monster is (perhaps) destroyed and order (perhaps) restored.”<sup>65</sup> Importantly, “this can be realized in a variety of ways.”<sup>66</sup> This balance of specificity and variety is also central to Carroll's work on the horror narrative. He identifies the key horror plot as the “complex discovery plot” which consists of four functions: the “onset” of the monster (the establishment of its existence to the audience, but not the protagonists); the “discovery” of the monster by the protagonists; “confirmation” of the monster (the protagonists must prove its

---

<sup>64</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 71.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: a cultural history of the horror movie* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1989), 81.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

existence to authoritative figures); and finally, “confrontation” with the monster, whereby it may or may not be vanquished.<sup>67</sup> This is a development from Carroll’s earlier work in which he outlined the “discovery plot,” identical to the “complex discovery plot” but for the exclusion of “confirmation.”<sup>68</sup> It is actually this earlier, less detailed “discovery plot” that is more widely applicable to children’s horror.

It is often impossible for “confirmation” to take place in the children’s horror narrative due to the nature of authoritative figures being unavailable, unable or unwilling to help. This trope is used for comedic effect in *Hocus Pocus* (1993), in which a group of children and teens on Halloween night accidentally bring three evil witches back from the dead. They attempt to enlist the help of a man who they assume is a police officer, but unbeknownst to them is actually an ordinary man in a convincing Halloween costume. The man plays into the mistake before dismissing the children, who leave with dejection, and laughing about it with his girlfriend. The children are also unable to get help from their parents, who have been put under a spell by the witches to dance all night long at a Halloween party. “Confirmation” is present in *Monster House*, but only to reinforce the ineffectuality of authority figures and to leave the “confrontation” to the child characters. With their parents away for the weekend and their babysitter uninterested in their warnings, the three child protagonists attempt to notify the police about the monstrous house in their neighborhood. The officers, who are presented as buffoons, begin to investigate as a way of humoring the children, but when they are “eaten” by the monster house they provide “confirmation” of its threat and leave the “confrontation” to the children.

Just as Tudor provides the qualifier that his basic horror narrative structure can “be realized in a variety of ways,” Carroll’s “(complex) discovery plot” can form a multitude of different horror plots by dropping one or more of the functions and/or shuffling their order. He cites the science-fiction/horror hybrid *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) as an example of what he terms the

---

<sup>67</sup> Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 99-103.

<sup>68</sup> Noël Carroll, “Nightmare and the Horror Film: the Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings,” *Film Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1981): 23.

“confirmation plot,” in which the monster is confirmed by the authorities but no confrontation takes place within the narrative.<sup>69</sup> This opens up a discussion concerning one other crucial aspect of the children’s horror film, which is the need for a happy, or at least resolved, ending. As indicated by the stereotypical fairy tale ending, “...and they lived happily ever after,” a happy ending is generally considered a staple of children’s stories of any genre. Kimberley Reynolds observes that children’s horror fiction in particular is “notable for the sense of security it provides” as “what seemed dangerous and menacing is made safe.”<sup>70</sup> This is supported by research which finds that children are far more likely to enjoy a narrative that has a resolved ending, especially if the narrative is one of a frightening nature.<sup>71</sup> The “confirmation” horror plot that ends without the confrontation (and usually destruction) of the monster is thus not one that features in horror films made for children.<sup>72</sup> *The Monster Squad*,

---

<sup>69</sup> Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 110.

<sup>70</sup> Kimberley Reynolds, “Horror Stories,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Jack Zipes

(2006), accessed January 20, 2016,

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195146561.001.0001/acref-9780195146561-e-1534>.

<sup>71</sup> Hoffner and Cantor, “Factors Affecting Children’s Enjoyment of a Frightening Film Sequence,” 41; John Stewig, “Children’s Preferences in Film,” *Journal of Visual Verbal Language* 8, no. 11 (1988): 76-77.

<sup>72</sup> This is not as often the case for children’s horror television or literature, particularly anthologies.

*Goosebumps* (both the book series and television adaptation) is known for twist endings which leave the monstrous threat undefeated and/or the protagonist in peril. There may be various reasons for this: perhaps the short natures of the stories leave the reader/viewer with less investment in the characters in comparison to feature films and makes the unresolved endings more “bearable.” With regards to television horror, it might be that the medium is inherently less frightening than film. Gregory Waller suggests that advert breaks disrupt the narrative “flow” and the domestic viewing context provides immediate comfort to the viewer, who “having been to hell and back” can “proceed with life as usual.” However, this work was published in 1987, and arguably the increased availability of film texts in the home since then makes this reasoning less specific to television alone. The issue of medium specificity in children’s horror is not one that can be fully explored here,

*The Gate*, *Hocus Pocus*, *Coraline* and *Monster House* are all children's horror films that end either with the total destruction of the monster or the trapping of it in a secure place (e.g. another dimension) from where it cannot return. A third ending, as seen in *The Hole* (2009) and *The Witches* (1990), entails the destruction of the monster with an indication that it will return, or the destruction of the "main" monster, leaving other, less threatening monsters to be taken care of. These films' resolutions, far from being distressing, indicate that the protagonist(s) now have the appropriate strength, knowledge and resources to successfully combat any remaining threat they encounter. This form of ending concurs with Natalie Babbitt's argument that children's stories do not necessarily have to have wholly happy endings, but should at least end with a feeling of hope.<sup>73</sup>

### Sympathy for the monster

The remainder of this article examines the presentation of the theme of acceptance in recent children's horror films. This theme is strongly linked with a fourth type of ending in children's horror that is present in a relatively recent cluster of three children's horror films that were released within two months of each other in 2012: *ParaNorman*, *Frankenweenie* and *Hotel Transylvania*. The "monsters" of these films are not destroyed or trapped. Rather, these films share the common themes of acceptance, redemption and sympathy, particularly the acceptance and redemption of, or extension of sympathy toward, monsters or others who do not fit within the "norm." While several horror films feature sympathetic monsters, like *Frankenstein* and *King Kong* (1933), they are set apart from twenty-first century children's horror films by their endings in which the monsters are killed. This difference is especially apparent when observed in *Frankenweenie*, an adaptation-cum-homage to

---

but is a subject that warrants detailed attention in further research. Gregory A. Waller, "Made-For-Television Horror Films," in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 159.

<sup>73</sup> Natalie Babbitt, "Happy Endings? Of Course, and Also Joy," in *Considering Children's Literature: A Reader*, ed. Andrea Schwenke Wyile and Teya Rosenberg (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2008), 7.



*Frankenstein*. Although Sparky the resurrected dog does “die” in *Frankenweenie* after having rescued his creator, Victor, from a burning windmill, he is shortly resurrected a second time when the townspeople collectively source the appropriate amount of electricity from their car batteries. This ending also includes a moral lesson for Victor, and by extension children in the audience, concerning something that they might encounter in their own lives: grief. In light of Sparky’s second “death” at the end of the film, Victor is finally able to come to terms with this loss in a way he could not before; Victor’s earlier inability to accept the initial death of his dog is what led him to resurrect Sparky. It is therefore important that it is only *after* Victor has accepted Sparky’s second “death” that he is “rewarded” with Sparky being resurrected once again.

*Frankenweenie*’s ending that revolves around acceptance (of the monster, of grief) is clearly a drastic departure from the 1931 *Frankenstein* which concludes with angry villagers purposefully burning the windmill in which the monster is trapped (while in *Frankenweenie* the windmill is set on fire by mistake), followed by a toast to the recovering Dr. Frankenstein. There are other monstrous resurrected animals in *Frankenweenie* who are destroyed and not mourned by their owners. They key difference between these pets and Sparky is that Sparky was resurrected by Victor out of love and grief, but the other pets only out of selfishness and ambition, whose owners – Victor’s classmates – want to win first place at the school science fair. Further, while Sparky is clearly as lovable after his resurrection as he was in life, the other pets have gone “wrong.” As explained by Victor’s science teacher, Mr. Rzykruski, it is because the other children did not “love” their experiments as Victor loved his. *Frankenweenie*, it should be noted, adheres not to Carroll’s “discovery plot,” but the alternative “overreacher plot” that is usually applicable to science-fiction/horror hybrids like *Frankenstein*. The phases of Carroll’s “overreacher plot” are: preparation for the experiment; the experiment itself; the experiment goes awry; the monster that resulted from the experiment is confronted and possibly destroyed.<sup>74</sup> What is interesting about *Frankenweenie*’s adherence to this structure is that the latter

---

<sup>74</sup> Carrol, *Philosophy of Horror*, 120.

two phases only apply to the aberrant pets, allowing the original creation, Sparky, to live with Victor “happily ever after.” This means that the narrative is able to adhere to the “overreacher plot” even while deviating from the 1931 *Frankenstein* in service of making the film “suitable” for a child audience, i.e. emphasizing the importance of love, friendship, acceptance, and the ethical use of science.

*ParaNorman* places even more emphasis upon the need for acceptance, which also extends to supporting characters. The teenaged character Mitch, for example, reveals nonchalantly that he has a boyfriend, making *ParaNorman* a very rare example of a children’s film that features a character who openly identifies themselves as gay within the narrative. With regards to the film’s “monstrous” characters, they are all redeemed. This includes the zombies who Norman initially fears, but later discovers do not want to eat his brains so much as pick them for advice on permanently putting Aggie’s spirit to rest. Moreover, they seek redemption and forgiveness for their cruel punishment of Aggie. Norman then speaks to Aggie’s spirit and persuades her to let go of her anger at her persecutors, thus allowing her to move on completely into the afterlife. Resulting from this, the redeemed zombies’ spirits are also allowed to move on. Like *Frankenweenie*’s adherence to the “overreacher” narrative, *ParaNorman* is able to closely follow Carroll’s “discovery” horror narrative even while it is made “suitable” for children by promoting positive messages of the benefits of acceptance, sympathy and communication.

In tandem with this narrative is the acceptance of Norman and his ability by his family, classmates and the rest of his town. This is an aspect that further differentiates the film from adult horror films with similar themes. Being a child medium situates Norman among a tradition of children in horror who possess an uncanny or supernatural ability, such as the children in *Village of the Damned* (1960), *The Innocents* (1961) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999). As discussed above, the presence of evil or mysterious children is a common feature of horror films for adults, so much so that Wood categorizes

children as one of the groups of “Others” in horror who signify that which society fears or represses.<sup>75</sup> As such, uncanny children in adult horror films tend to be treated with ambiguity and suspicion. Of the above examples, only *The Sixth Sense* reveals that its child medium, Cole, is not malevolent but a misunderstood victim and force for good who ultimately uses his ability to “[facilitate] personal and social resolution and justice.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, Sage Leslie-McCarthy notes that even when treated with sympathy, filmic child mediums like Cole are still largely “defined by their ‘otherness,’ by what they are not: not normal, not adult, not trustworthy.”<sup>77</sup> *ParaNorman* diverges from these earlier portrayals in being presented (almost) entirely from Norman’s perspective. In doing so, the film aligns the viewer firmly with Norman, and presents him not as either victimized or malevolent like his predecessors, but as a “normal” child who must navigate adolescent issues and also just happens to be able to communicate with the dead.

The audience’s alignment with Norman is demonstrated very early in the film, which opens with Norman watching a zombie film on television with his grandmother’s ghost. In the next scene, Norman tells his father that his grandmother would like the thermostat turned up. This spurs a heated discussion between Norman’s parents regarding his need to accept that his grandmother is dead, and their concern for Norman’s mental wellbeing. The scene is predominantly shot at the height of Norman’s eye-line, a strategy that places the audience in Norman’s sympathetic point-of-view and results in his parents being introduced with only the lower halves of their bodies visible; they literally and figuratively do not see eye-to-eye with Norman. This differs drastically from *The Sixth Sense* which largely takes advantage of the “uncanny child” trope by treating Cole with ambiguity and suspicion.

---

<sup>75</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 67.

<sup>76</sup> Sage Leslie-McCarthy, “‘I See Dead People’: Ghost-Seeing Children as Mediums and Mediators of Communication in Contemporary Horror Cinema,” in *Lost and Othered Children in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Debbie C. Olson and Andrew Scahill (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), 2.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

This is achieved by framing Cole almost entirely through the perspectives of adult characters who do not know about his ability – his mother, Lynn, and Bruce Willis’ protagonist, Malcom – until it is revealed half-way through the film. The result is that the audience are left in suspense as to whether Cole is malevolent or disturbed in the vein of other “uncanny” children in horror films. While Cole is eventually shown to be innocent and reconciles with his mother due to the power of communication, he and his evil predecessors represent the way that children like Norman are usually treated in adult horror: as figures of mystery who incite fear and suspicion from adults who represent the “norm.”

*Hotel Transylvania* is set apart from *ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie* in that it does not follow a “typical” horror plot structure.<sup>78</sup> In the film, monsters such as Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster (here named Frank), a werewolf named Wayne and a mummy named Murray are in fact benevolent beings who are unfairly persecuted by humans. In response, Dracula founds the titular hotel to keep the monsters safe. 118 years later, in the present day, their haven is “invaded” by a friendly human, Johnny. The remainder of the film concerns Dracula’s anxiety that his teenaged daughter, Mavis, is falling in love with Johnny. As such, the film’s structure is more akin to a relationship comedy, like *Meet the Parents* (2000), in which most of the characters just happen to be monsters. In suggesting that humans are the real monsters, it does however humorously invert Wood’s proposed horror plot in which “normality is invaded by the monster.”<sup>79</sup> The film’s hybridity can be seen as providing the variation that Neale points to as being crucial to the development of genres. The theme of acceptance of course stems from Dracula’s need to accept the relationship between Mavis and Johnny. In turn, Dracula finds that humans have become far more accepting of monsters in the 118 years since he founded the hotel. Rather than the theme of acceptance being a brief trend in these three children’s

---

<sup>78</sup> It is also an example of a children’s horror film that does not feature a child protagonist. It can be identified as children’s horror by other factors, such as that it is animated, PG-rated, predominately comedic, and was accompanied by a glut of children’s merchandise such as McDonald’s Happy Meal toys.

<sup>79</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 71.

horror films released in quick succession in 2012, it continues to proliferate in subsequent films such as *Hotel Transylvania 2* and *The Boxtrolls* (2014), the latter of which was also created by Laika.

### Accepting children's horror

This paper concludes with the final observation that *ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie* are further linked by the detail that Norman and Victor are children who interact with the horror genre. In Norman's case this is as viewer/consumer of fictional horror through audio-visual media and toys. Victor, conversely, is a creator/consumer of horror in that he creates his own horror/science-fiction home movies starring Sparky. In contrast to social anxiety that horror media is a harmful influence on children, Norman and Victor's interactions with fictional horror are presented as positive experiences which aid them in dealing with horror that they face in their realities; therefore, it can be read that these films advocate for children's viewing and consumption of the horror genre as an acceptable, and possibly even beneficial, pastime.<sup>80</sup>

In contrast with concerns that children's consumption of horror will cause them to become delinquents, Norman is placed in opposition to another child in *ParaNorman*, Alvin, who is characterized as an unintelligent bully and petty criminal. Alvin's viewing habits are referred to when he says that he would happily spend the zombie invasion in a nearby adult video store. Similarly, *Frankenweenie's* Victor is implied to be the only child among his peers who takes an active interest in creating or consuming horror. Both Norman and Victor are shown at the beginnings of each text viewing or creating horror with others: Norman watches with his grandmother's ghost, and Victor

---

<sup>80</sup> *The Boxtrolls* can also be read as an analogy for this given that the film's nineteenth century setting means that viewing horror films is not possible. The protagonist, a boy named Eggs, has been raised by the titular boxtrolls, benevolent creatures who are mistaken by humans to be vicious monsters. That Eggs' upbringing by them has not resulted in him becoming monstrous, as the other humans believe will happen, can be likened to the act of watching horror not necessarily having an adverse effect on children.

creates his home movies with Sparky, and then watches them with his parents who appear to encourage their son's hobby.<sup>81</sup> These details chime with Buckingham's hypothesis that the effect of horror on children will depend upon "the social contexts in which they watch and subsequently talk about it with others."<sup>82</sup> Later, when Victor's parents discover that he has brought Sparky back to life they are reproachful but otherwise accepting of their beloved un-dead pet. This contrasts with Norman's parents who show great concern about Norman's claims that he can see ghosts, which they believe is a delusion, and a milder concern for the fact that Norman enjoys watching horror. It takes until the end of the film – by which point the existence of the zombies has proven that Norman is not delusional – for Norman's parents to accept their son's ability and viewing habits. This is shown in the final scene which mirrors the film's opening. Where before Norman watched a horror film on television with only his grandmother's ghost (Fig. 2), at the end his parents sit down with him, acknowledge the ghost's presence, though they cannot see or hear her, and they watch the film together (Fig. 3).

Each film also indicates that there is something that Norman and Victor find therapeutic in their interactions with horror. In *Frankenweenie*, in between Sparky's first death and resurrection, a grief-stricken Victor re-watches the home movies he made with Sparky in a suggestion that this somewhat alleviates his grief. Early in *ParaNorman*, when Norman's parents enter a heated discussion about Norman's mental wellbeing, Norman goes to his bedroom where he dejectedly plays with two zombie figurines in a mock imitation of his arguing parents. This again recalls Freud's claim that

---

<sup>81</sup> They are also shown to be horror fans in their own right when they are shown watching *Horror of Dracula* (1958) on television. Their accepting and progressive attitude is also displayed, and shown to be unusual among the other adults of the film, when the science teacher Mr. Rzykruski is fired for seeming to be a bad influence on children, and Victor's parents are alone in defending him.

<sup>82</sup> Buckingham, *Moving Images*, 136.

children gain “mastery” over things that distress them by creating games based on them.<sup>83</sup> The ultimate beneficiary of interacting with horror is *ParaNorman*’s Aggie, whose vengeful spirit has been placated for three centuries with a book of fairy tales. The film suggests that the feeding of these “bedtime stories,” as Norman calls them, has been preventing Aggie from confronting her pain, which stems not only from her wrongful execution but also her separation from her mother.<sup>84</sup> Norman, who has experience with using horror as a way of dealing with his anxieties, forces Aggie to confront her grief head-on by telling it to her as a “story.” When this has the desired effect of bringing Aggie’s suffering to a close she contentedly passes on to the afterlife; but first, she asks Norman whether he ever wants to make people suffer for bullying him. Norman responds, “Well, yeah, but... what good would that do?” It is possible to read that Norman’s consumption of horror through audio-visual media and toys has provided an outlet for him to enact the violence that he might otherwise have directed toward his family, Alvin the bully, and everyone else who ever disbelieved or ridiculed him.

*ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie* cannot necessarily tell us about the ways that real children interact with horror and whether or not watching horror is of any benefit to them. However, that both of these films are about well-adjusted children who consume horror, and that they are themselves horror films intended for real children to consume and which received industry accolades, critical praise and modest financial success, may be revealing of shifting attitudes in Western culture toward children’s consumption of “horrific” media. As this paper has shown, the horror genre is perfectly able to be “suitable” for children, according to film rating bodies, without completely discarding the elements that identify it as “horror”. The children’s horror films referenced throughout draw heavily

---

<sup>83</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 8-10.

<sup>84</sup> That fairy tales are implied to have been ineffective at helping Aggie overcome her grief seems to indirectly refute psychoanalytic work which argues that reading fairy tales helps children overcome their unconscious fears and anxieties. See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1976).

upon typical conventions of the genre, including the presence of monsters, the evocation of disgust, and narrative structures that hinge upon if and how the monstrous presence will be defeated. They are simultaneously able to deviate and become “child-friendly” by excluding, or finding strategic ways to alleviate, horrific elements that might be thought to distress child viewers, such as the lessening of realism and violence through stylized animation or moments of humor. These films also frequently display a specific targeting of the child demographic by placing children at the centers of the narratives as independent, resourceful and identifiable characters who do not need the help of adults. With more horror films targeting child audiences on Hollywood’s horizon, from established “children’s horror auteurs” Tim Burton and Laika studios, as well as others, it seems that children’s horror is not only an entirely possible sub-genre, but one that is full of possibility.

### Figures



*Figure 1: Norman becomes trapped beneath the abject corpse of his uncle: a moment of equal horror and humor.*





*Figure 2: Norman watches a zombie film on television under the supervision of his grandmother's ghost at the beginning of ParaNorman.*



*Figure 3: The closing shot of ParaNorman, in which Norman watches a zombie film on television with his whole family. The warm lighting of this shot is in stark contrast to the cold, low-key lighting seen in Fig. 2. This reflects the fact that Norman's family members are now accepting of his ability as a medium and his taste in horror films.*